

Chapter 13. The Path of Spiritual Progress

The study of the nature and functions of the various paths is an integral part of Abhidharma. One of the four great Sarvāstivāda masters, Ghoṣaka, underscores this in his definition of abhidharma:

“For the seeker for liberation engaged in the proper practice, [abhidharma] can analyze what has not been understood: this is dukkha; this is the cause of dukkha; this is the cessation of dukkha; this is the path leading to the cessation; this is the preparatory path (prayoga-mārga); this is the unhindered path (ānantarya-mārga); this is the path of liberation (vimukti-mārga); this is the path of advance (viśeṣa-mārga); this is the path of the candidate (pratipannaka-mārga); this is the acquisition of fruit. Abhidharma is so called because it can correctly analyze such meanings.”

For the Sarvāstivāda, the path of spiritual progress is a very long journey. It takes three asaṃkhyeya-kalpa-s for a practitioner to reach the state of perfect Buddhahood practicing accumulatively the six perfections (śīla-, dāna-, vīrya-, kṣānti-, dhyāna- and prajñā-pāramitā) and tens of thousands of difficult practices on the way. This long period of practice pertains, in fact, only to the stage of preparatory effort (prayoga). The whole process is one of gradual progress, and the Sarvāstivāda doctrine is definitely not one of sudden enlightenment.

The Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra states two counteractions for the abandonment of defilements –

1. the path of insight (darśana-mārga) and
2. the path of cultivation (bhāvanā-mārga)

Each of the three spheres of existence has these two categories of defilements - darśana-heya and bhāvanā-heya which must be totally eradicated, and this process takes place gradually, not all at once.

In the Sarvāstivāda system, the gradual path of spiritual progress begins at the stage when the practitioner is an ordinary worldling. When he becomes an ārya, he must continue to move up gradually. The gradual degree of spiritual insight acquired on the whole path correspond to the gradual abandoning of defilements at the various stages.

At the very final stage of the path of cultivation, the vajropama-samādhi arises and the practitioner cuts off whatever defilements remain. He then acquires a homogeneous acquisition of disjunction (visamyoga-prāpti) collectively with regards to the abandonment of all defilements pertaining to the two categories in the three spheres and he is said to have acquired the complete knowledge of all exhaustion of all fetters and this is the end of the journey – the Perfect rest.

The preparatory stage (prayoga), in the proper sense, comprises of meditational practices. But, in keeping with the general Buddhist tradition, the whole spiritual path of the Sarvāstivāda is an integrated system of śīla –samādhi–prajñā. The stages include studying the Buddha's teaching, studying the Abhidharma, meditations such as contemplation on the impure and mindfulness of breathing (cintāmayī prajñā) and attainment of outflow-free prajñā (final destination).

The path also includes both social and religious, such as attending on the sick and expounding the Dharma, but also the following two additional contemplative practices:

- (1) Contemplation of the three meanings, which refers to the sequential contemplation on the true meanings of the skandha-s, āyatana-s and dhātu-s
- (2) Skilfulness with regard to the seven abodes which is an examination of the five aggregates truly as they are. from seven perspectives. To take rūpa as an example: one examines rūpa itself as
 - (i) fruit, and
 - (ii) the causes from which it is generated. One further examines
 - (iii) its cessation,
 - (iv) the counteracting path leading to its cessation,
 - (v) it's enjoyable aspect (āsvādana) as an object of attachment,
 - (vi) its loathsome aspect as a fault (ādīnava) to be avoided, and finally
 - (vii) the transcendence of its attachment.

To ensure success in meditation, one must purify one's body and mind in three ways:

- (i) physical withdrawal or distancing (vyapakaṛṣa) by dissociating from evil friends and cutting off unfavourable conditions, and mental withdrawal by eradicating unskilful thoughts (akuśala vitarka);
- (ii) practicing contentment and having few desires
- (iii) abiding in the four noble lineages

The whole path leading to this final perfection is divided by the Sarvāstivādins into the seven stages of preparatory effort (prayoga) leading to the four stages of spiritual fruits (phala), that is śrotaāpatti, sakṛdāgāmin, anāgāmin and arhat.

The preparatory path comprises two portions:

- (1) mokṣa-bhāgīya: those conducing, that is, serving as causes, to liberation (= nirvāṇa);
- (2) nirvedha- bhāgīya: those conducing to decisive distinction, i.e., to the arising of outflow-free knowledge.

The mokṣa-bhāgīya are acquired through effort and they have as their intrinsic nature (svabhāva) the threefold karma - bodily, vocal and mental. They are produced only among human beings, only in those existing in kāmādhātu. They may arise as a result of the practice of giving, or of ethical observance, or of hearing (learning) the Dharma from others: One may plant these seeds of liberation by the mere giving of

one lump of food or by the mere observance of the eight precepts (upavasthā- śīla), etc., provided the motivation is genuinely for liberation.

The nirvedha-bhāgīya is also collectively called the four skilful roots, as they lead to the fruition of stream entry (srotāpatti) which is the point of no return in the spiritual journey — the practitioner is henceforth destined for perfect liberation. It is the critical point at which a pṛthagjana becomes an ārya, never to retrogress to be a mundane worldling again. The Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra, however, speaks of both portions equally as being skilful roots — in the sense of being seeds planted for liberation. These can be planted only by those who have a strong aspiration for nirvāṇa and disgust for saṃsāra. Once they have been planted, it takes a minimum of three lives to attain liberation: in the first life the seeds are planted; in the second, they are matured; in the third, liberation is attained. But it may take many many kalpa-s (a) if the practitioner fails to give rise to the nirvedha- bhāgīya.

Śamatha and vipaśyanā

The practitioner begins with the two śamatha practices of contemplation on the impure (aśubha-bhāvanā) and mindfulness of breathing (ānāpānasmṛti) which constitute the entrance into spiritual cultivation proper. The former practice is the contemplation on the progressive deterioration of the body, and has the counteraction of greed as its aim. The latter comprises six aspects: counting, following, fixing, observing, modifying and purifying. The Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra calls these two meditational practices the two gateways of immortality, that is, nirvāṇa.

Direct realization (*abhisamaya*), path of insight (*darśana-mārga*) and stream entry (*srotāpatti*)

In the stages of preparatory effort, contemplations on the truths were carried out with knowledges that are with-outflow (sāsrava). Immediately following the moment of the worldly supreme dharma-s, the practitioner is able to give rise to the outflow-free knowledges (anāsrava-jñāna) with which he again contemplates the 16 modes of activity of the four truths — those pertaining to the sphere of sensuality followed by those pertaining to the two upper spheres. This contemplation is termed abhisamaya — direct realization — which is the direct spiritual insight into the truths. This process takes 16 thought moments the first 15 of which constitute the path of insight (darśana-mārga) and the 16 is the beginning of the path of cultivation (bhāvanā-mārga).

Complete insight into each of the truths is achieved in two moments, called ‘paths’ on account of their having to be gone through. In the first moment, called the unhindered path (ānantarya-mārga), the outflow-free understanding that arises is called a receptivity (kṣānti) to knowledge, and with this, the defilements abandonable by insight into the particular truth are abandoned. In the following moment, called the path of liberation (vimukti-mārga), knowledge proper arises through the induction of which the acquisition (prāpti) of the cessation through deliberation (pratisamkhyā-nirodha) of the defilements arises. In this way, for the whole contemplative process covering the sphere of sensuality followed by the two upper spheres, there arise eight receptivities and eight knowledges, all being prajñā in their intrinsic nature.

This doctrine can be understood as follows: The abandoning of defilement requires a sufficient degree of insight, represented by the notion of receptivity, into the true nature of things — unsatisfactory, impermanent, etc. When in the next moment the defilement which disturbs and sullies, the mind is no more, wisdom proper — a higher degree than receptivity — ‘shines forth’ as it were.

In the Sarvāstivāda conception, the insight, designated as *jñāna*, that constitutes the very path of liberation is not just a mere state of mental clarity or cognitive perfection. It is a positive force having the efficacy of inducing the *prāpti* of *prāṭisamkhyā* *nirodha*; which is to say, it serves as the necessary causal factor for the acquisition of the *nirodha*. The latter, being unconditioned, is not directly caused or directly produced by it; it is, however, acquired (*prāpta*) by virtue of the *prāpti* so induced by it. In the the *Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra*, an example of *aprāṭisamkhyā* *nirodha* is given as, when a person directs his attention to a visual object, then all other dharma-s in all other directions would have *aprāṭisamkhyā* *nirodha* as they come to cease. Remember that the Sarvāstivādin believes in momentariness. Therefore if in this particular moment, a person directs his attention to a visual object, all his mind and mental concomitants would respond to the same visual object. The result is that the mind (consciousness) and the mental concomitants that would have taken these other dharma-s in other direction cease to arise absolutely, resulting in the arising of *aprāṭisamkhyā* *nirodha* of these other dharma-s. So we are oblivious to all other objects apart from the one we are directing attention at, all these other dharma-s would go to the past mode never to arise again. But their counterparts would still be generated so that a table, though not having our attention this moment stands in front of us the next moment whether we see it or not. This aspect of *aprāṭisamkhyā* *nirodha* pertains to epistemology, the other aspect pertains to the spiritual domain. In the case of a saint (*srota-panna*) he will never take rebirth in the lower realms (hell, animals and hungry ghost realms). In the Sarvāstivādin’s understanding, the arising of such lower realms is not possible due to the arising of *aprāṭisamkhyā* *nirodha* by the deficiency in conditions, in this case the saint’s lack of defilements and bad karma.

Prāpti is a dharma that links other dharma-s to a particular psycho-physical series (*santati*). Hence when we say a person has ‘greed’, the Sarvāstivādin will understand this as: this mental concomitant ‘greed’ is connected to this *santati* by *prāpti*. *Prāpti* can be imagined as a hook or a chain that binds external dharma-s to the *santati*. This *prāpti* can be produced by conditions and forms a series of its own type, until it’s opposite; the *aprāpti* is produced by necessary conditions. If *prāpti* can be imagined to be a hook or a chain, *aprāpti* can be imagined as a cutter that has cuts this hook or chain. An ordinary person is defined as one who has the *aprāpti* to pure dharma like *nirvāṇa* whereas a saint (*ārya*) is defined as one who has the *prāpti* to pure dharmas and *aprāpti* to defilements.

Even when we are in wholesome states of mind, greed is still linked to us because of *prāpti*. It merely has no chance to predominate the mind due to the strength of other wholesome caitas (thoughts). The arising of ‘greed’ in Sarvāstivāda does not mean that only at a particular mental thought greed is produced in the mind. Rather it means that greed is given condition to predominate. The cessation of greed similarly does not mean that greed ceases to exist in the mind but rather that its strength has abated in that particular mental moment. The only time when greed really ceases to

exist in the mind is when the prāpti linking it to the mind is disrupted and cancelled out by the arising of prāpti.

So how does prāpti arises? What are the cause and conditions for the arising of prāpti? It is through spiritual practices, when the strength of Prajñā or paññā (Pāli) is enhanced, when the prāpti to pure dharma-s are conditioned to arise, the aprāpti of greed will also arises. This process of liberation actually takes two moments: in the first moment, the aprāpti to greed is prevented from arising due to the strength of pure dharma-s acquired through spiritual practice that accumulates to this moment. Conventionally speaking, at this moment one is finally freed and free from greed; the second moment the aprāpti to greed arises to put a final end to this particular prapti series so that prāpti to greed can never arise again, that is to say there is no retrogression from this state of liberation. At the same time, the prāpti to the fruit of disconnection arises, that is, one realizes that one is free from greed.

The process of the direct insight into the four truths

The Paths of darśana mārga which is refers to the 15 thoughts moments of direct comprehension (abhisamaya) into the four noble Truths, at the end of which one becomes a sroto- panna.

The Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra further explains that all ārya-s are called ‘equal beings’ because they attain the truth equally, see equally, are inclined equally. The ordinary worldlings are different from them — not having equality in the same manner as the ārya-s; hence they are called pṛthagjana. From the first moment of his entry into the darśanaya-mārga up to the 15th moment, this ārya is called the candidate for the fruit of stream-entry (srotaāpatti-phala-pratipannaka). He has now abandoned 88 defilements abandonable by insight. At the 16th moment, he is called the “abider in the fruit of stream entry” (srotaāpatti-phala-stha). He is destined to final liberation within a maximum of seven rebirths. However, according to the Vaibhāṣikas, the stream-entrant is said to be reborn at most seven times in the sense that he will have seven births as a human, seven intermediate existences (antarābhava); likewise his births among the gods — a total of up to 28 existences.

The Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra explains the term stream entrant as, “Srotas means the noble path; ā-panna means entered. He is called a stream entrant (srotaāpana) as he has entered the noble path”. In the first 15 moments of the path, the former is called a ‘pursuer through faith’, the latter, ‘pursuer through the doctrines’ At the 16th moment, the former is called ‘one who is freed through predominance of faith’ the latter, ‘one who has attained through views’.

The darśana-mārga is not retrogressible, for it is a path — process — which proceeds very swiftly, without being held back or prematurely interrupted. Just as one being carried forward by a rapid incapable of holding back, when the practitioner is on this path, he is being carried away by the great current of Dharma; there is no possibility of his going backward. Moreover, one retrogresses mostly on account of the manifestation of defilements; when one is within the darśana-mārga, there is no possibility of generating even a kuśala-citta that is with-outflow, let alone a citta of defilements. Hence there can be no retrogression.

Path of cultivation (bhāvanā-mārga)

The word *bhāvanā*, often translated as ‘meditation’ is more literally —and also more correctly — ‘cultivation’ or ‘development’ of the mind. It is, however, true that meditation constitutes the most important aspect of the process. All Buddhist tradition emphasize on meditation, the two counteractions for abandonment of defilements are the path of insight and the path of cultivation.

In the Sarvāstivāda context, the path of cultivation is the stage of repeated practice which begins at the 16th moment of *satyābhisamaya*. It is through this stage which may last a considerable period of time that all the tenacious defilements remaining after the *darśana-mārga* come to be gradually eradicated.

These *bhāvanā-heya* defilements comprise *rāga*, *pratigha*, *moha* and *māna* pertaining to the *kāmadhātu*; and three each — excluding *pratigha* which does not exist in a mind of meditation which is concentrated — in the two upper spheres. This gives a total of ten defilements. As these defilements are blunt by nature and hence difficult to detect and differentiate, they are collectively classified into nine grades on the basis of the degree of strength of their arising — weak (*mṛdu*), medium (*madhya*), strong (*adhimātra*); each again subdivided into weak, medium, strong — thus giving weak-weak, etc., up to strong-strong.

Whereas the *darśana-mārga* is a sharp or forceful path which on arising cuts off all the nine grades of the defilements at once, the *bhāvanā-mārga* is not forceful, so that the nine grades are cut off gradually through repeated practice, one by one. (This is like two knives, one sharp and one blunt, cutting the same thing; the sharp one cuts it at once, the blunt one gradually). While the path of insight may last for only 15 consecutive moments, the path of cultivation may last a lifetime or even more.

The stream entrant (*srotaāpana*), embarks on a journey of repeated cultivation (*bhāvanā*) to elevate his insight for the purpose of cultivating the remaining defilements. This contemplation is the direct spiritual insight into the truths. The process takes 16 thoughts moments, the first 15 of which constitutes the *darśana-mārga* and the 16th is the beginning of the Path of cultivation.

The ten defilements

There are 10 defilements abandoned through the path of cultivation. These are innate and constituted 4 of the fundamental defilements — *rāga*, *pratigha*, *māna* and *advidyā*. The 10 defilements are more tenacious than the one abandoned in the *darśana-mārga* and therefore needed persistent efforts through cultivation to be abandoned.

The *Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra* explains why, for each of the modes of activity (*dukkha*, etc.), the practitioner must first contemplate that pertaining to the sphere of sensuality, and then collectively that pertaining to the upper spheres:

- (i) the former is grosser and more easily observed than the latter
- (ii) the sphere of sensuality is a non-concentrated stage, whereas the two upper spheres are both concentrated (samāhita) stages; hence the practitioner must do the two contemplations separately.

4 defilements pertain to the sphere of sensuality and 3 to each of the upper spheres.

Kāmadhātu – rāga, pratigha, māna and advidyā (4)

Rūpadhātu – rāga, māna and advidyā (3)

Arūpadhātu - rāga, māna and advidyā (3)

These defilements whose various grades come to be gradually thinned and finally abandoned completely as a results of practice, cultivation and repeated action in accordance with the paths. The sequence of abandoning the defilements begins with the strong-strong grade in the Kāmadhātu and end with the weak-weak in the Arūpadhātu. In this way a total of 88 grades of defilements existing in the 9 bhumis-Kāmadhātu, the 4 dhyānas of the Arūpadhātu and the 4 Arūpadhātu came to be successively eradicated.

Finally the defilements are abandoned in the immediate path through knowledge. At the final stage, when the practitioner abandons the weak-weak grade and arrives at the path of liberation, he enters the path of non trainee and becomes an arahant. An arahant is called a non trainee because he has completed all training and abandoned the entire 9th grade and abiding in the vimukti mārga and attain the fruits of a non returner. He will no longer be born in the Kāmadhātu. The non returner has realised nirodha-samāpatti which is the sharpest of all the faculties of a non returner.

Retrogressibility of an arhat

It is an abhidharma controversy as to whether an arhat is retrogressible or not. For the Vibhajyavādins, his retrogression is impossible: When a vase has been broken, there remain only the broken pieces; it can no further be a vase. The case of an arhat ought to be the same — having crushed the defilements with the vajropama-samādhi, he ought not to give rise to the defilements again and retrogress. Just as, a log having been burnt, there remain only the ashes, it does not become a log any more. The same should be true for the arhat — having burnt the defilements with the fire of the outflow-free knowledge, he ought not give rise to the defilements again and retrogress.

The Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra quotes the sūtra as teaching that there are five reasons for the transgression of such an arhat such as taking too much undertakings, indulgence in conceptual proliferation, being fond of quarrel, being fond of traveling afar, being constantly sick.

In the Sphere of Sensuality

Through the Path of Vision – darśana mārga

10 defilements that can be abandoned - in the Sphere of Sensuality

	Dukkha (10)	Sanskrit	Samudaya (7)	Nirodha (7)	Mārga - bhāvanā mārga (8)
1	greed	rāga	1. greed	1. greed	1. greed
2	hatred/hostility	pratigka	2. hatred	2. hatred	2. hatred
3	conceit	māna	3. conceit	3. conceit	3. conceit
4	ignorance	avidyā	4. ignorance	4. ignorance	4. ignorance
5	doubt	vicikitsā	5. doubt	5. doubt	5. doubt
6	self view	satkaya dr̥ṣṭi	6. self view	6. self view	6. self view
7	false view	mithyā dr̥ṣṭi	7. false view	7. false view	7. false view
8	view of extremes	antagraha dr̥ṣṭi			8. attachment to rites and rituals
9	attachment to rites and rituals	śīla vrata paramarsa			
10	view of self	dr̥ṣṭi paramarsa	Total of 10 + 7 + 7 + 8 = 32 defilements		

Defilements that can be abandoned - in the Sphere of Form and Formlessness

Through the Path of Vision

	Dukkha (9)		Samudaya (6)	Nirodha (6)	Mārga - Bhāvana mārga (7)
1	greed	rāga	1. greed	1. greed	1. greed
2	conceit	māna	2. conceit	2. conceit	2. conceit
3	ignorance	avidyā	3. ignorance	3. ignorance	3. ignorance
4	doubt	vicikitsā	4. doubt	4. doubt	4. doubt
5	self view	satkaya dr̥ṣṭi	5. self view	5. self view	5. self view
6	false view	mithya dr̥ṣṭi	6. false view	6. false view	6. false view
7	view of extremes	antagraha dr̥ṣṭi			7. attachment to rites and rituals
8	attachment to rites and rituals	śīla vrata paramarsa			
9	view of self	dr̥ṣṭi paramarsa	Total of 9 + 6 + 6 + 7 = 28 defilements		

10 defilements abandoned through the Paths of Cultivation (innate and intrinsically tenacious and resilient and only abandonable through cultivation)

4 belongs to the sphere of sensuality = greed, hatred, conceit and ignorance.

3 belongs to the sphere of form = greed, conceit, and ignorance.

3 belongs to the sphere of formlessness = greed, conceit, and ignorance.

10 Total

Therefore 32 + 28 + 28 = 88 defilements